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SUBJECT: ALGERIA'S DEMOCRACY REMAINS A WORK IN PROGRESS,
ISLAMIST PARTIES SAY

REF: A. ALGIERS 01704

1B. ALGIERS 01724

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Thomas F. Daughton
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Political contacts from two moderate
Islamist parties believe Algeria's democracy is a work in
progress and that civil liberties are overly restricted.
Both parties cite difficulty in organizing civic groups as a
notable problem. The contacts also believe that the Islamic
Salvation Front (FIS) had lost considerable popular support
and was unlikely to make a serious comeback. The parties
support a constitutional revision, as President Bouteflika
has proposed, but want specific information about what it
will entail. END SUMMARY

Algeria: A Fragile Democracy?

12. (C) Abdelouahab Abdelhalim, national secretary in charge
of youth for the Society for Peace Movement (MSP, a member of
the presidential coalition that holds 38 parliamentary seats
and 4 cabinet positions), told poloff October 3 that
democracy in Algeria, until additional liberties were
enshrined in the constitution, would remain fragile and that
the government overly restricted civil liberties. He cited
difficulties with his own attempts over five years to
organize different groups of artists, women, athletes, human
rights activists and humanitarians, and maintained that the
government had repeatedly blocked the groups' attempts to
obtain legal recognition. At present, he added, political
parties were not allowed to have formal relationships with
student unions, though they existed informally. In sum,
democracy in Algeria remained a work in progress.

13. (C) On October 9 Ali Bengouya, national secretary in
charge of youth for Islah, an opposition party that holds 43
parliamentary seats, echoed those remarks, telling poloff
that Algerian democracy was at a fragile state of development
and that the political environment was not very open. He
added that Islah viewed preparations for May 2007
parliamentary elections as a "struggle on a daily basis."

National Reconciliation and a Reborn FIS?

14. (C) MSP's Abdelhalim said that the national reconciliation
process and the resulting return of former Islamic Salvation
Front (FIS) leader Rabeh Kebir (ref A) made a new and changed
FIS party possible, though he did not elaborate on what a
changed FIS might look like. When asked why elements of the

FIS did not simply integrate into other political parties, he responded that some of its members had, but noted that ideological differences made it difficult for former FIS members to integrate into MSP. He added that MSP supported the government's compensation plan for the families of those who disappeared during the violence of the 1990s, as well as the national reconciliation process. Both were important for Algeria as it moved forward.

¶ 15. (C) Islah's Bengouya maintained that a revitalized FIS was unlikely to reappear in Algeria because the party no longer had the influence that it once had. If it was revived, he added, it would be different and renamed. He viewed the national reconciliation process as a "good idea." Open debate, specifically on national reconciliation, was positive for Algeria. Bengouya maintained, however, that there had been no open debate on national reconciliation. Instead, he asserted, President Bouteflika bypassed discussion of the measure by issuing it as an ordinance.

Constitutional Revisions

¶ 16. (C) President Bouteflika's intention to amend the existing constitution through a national referendum process has been openly discussed for months. In our conversation, MSP's Abdelhalim supported the principle of revising the constitution, but stressed that Bouteflika had not presented the specifics of his plan. Islah's Bengouya viewed constitutional revisions as an opportunity to provide clarity on the status of political parties, on the conduct of elections, and on the relationship between parliament and other government bodies. He dismissed concern about presidential succession and said attention to it was largely media-driven (ref B).

¶ 17. (C) Comment: The view from the two main Islamist parties that freedom remains overly restricted in Algeria is consistent with that of NGOs. Many foreign NGOs are in limbo because they lack legal permission to operate, though the government, with varying degrees of interference, permits them to do so. Islah clearly views itself as a guardian of Algeria's traditional values, which sets it apart from MSP. When asked about last year's revisions to Algeria's Family Code, which expanded freedom for women, Bengouya voiced opposition to them and said that the party had a responsibility to help preserve the country's culture and religion. MSP, in contrast, supported the changes.

DAUGHTON